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AUTHOR Wilson, W. C.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

School choice is the right of parents to decide where their children will attend school, regardless of residential school district boundaries. According to E. Marciniak (1989), the primary reason for advocating school choice was lack of progress in public school reform during the 1980s. The rationale for school choice is based on two assumptions: that all parents want the responsibility for educating their children; and that schools will increase efforts to achieve high standards. This research report defines school choice, examines its desired effects, and explores attitudes of parents, teachers, education professors, and superintendents toward public school choice. A survey instrument was field-tested and administered to representatives of these four groups. Results indicate inconsistencies in the groups' perceptions of school choice or its desirability as a reform. A major concern is that schools would become segregated along racial, economic, academic, or class lines and that an equal opportunity for education would not exist. Most opposition centers around the belief that if tax dollars follow the student to his or her school of choice, poor districts would become poorer while wealthy districts would become richer. Superintendents were most outspoken against choice, while 67 percent of parents favored choice. Four tables are appended. (12 references) (MLH)

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ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL CHOICE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

W. C. WILSON
J. L. FLANIGAN
M. D. RICHARDSON

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Wendy Wilson recently completed the MED degree in Educational Administration at **Clemson University** and is currently employed as a career counselor at **Liberty Middle School**, Liberty, SC; **Jack Flanigan** is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Educational Administration; and, **Mike Richardson** is Associate Professor of Educational Administration, both at **Clemson University**, Clemson, SC 29634 (803-656-3482).

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**In most places around the country,
students are arbitrarily assigned by their school systems
to a single public school.
If that school is a bad one,
its students are trapped.**

-----President George Bush

ABSTRACT

Public school choice is a term prevalent in today's political and educational arenas. Marciniak (1989) stated that the primary reason school choice was advocated was the lack of progress in public school reform demonstrated during the 1980s. School choice may be defined as the right of parents to decide where their child will attend school, regardless of residential school-district boundaries. The success of school choice is based on two assumptions: that all parents want the responsibility for educating their child and that schools will increase efforts to achieve high standards.

The questions to be addressed by this research report are: What is school choice; what are the desired effects of school choice; and, what are the attitudes

toward school choice in South Carolina? The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of four constituent groups; parents, teachers, professors of education, and superintendents, toward public school choice. A survey instrument was field tested and administered to representatives of the four groups.

An analysis of the data indicated that the groups were not consistent in their perceptions of school choice or the desirability of implementing such reform. A major concern is that schools would become segregated along racial, economic, academic or class lines and that an equal opportunity for education would not exist. Most opposition centers around the belief that if tax dollars follow the student to their school of choice, poor districts will become poorer, while wealthy districts become richer.

INTRODUCTION

Many parents believe that their children are trapped in the neighborhood school with no choice of school program, instructional quality, or educational opportunity. However, a few school systems are attempting to address the problem of "parent empowerment" by utilizing school choice options.

Public school choice is a term prevalent in today's educational literature and in the political arena. There are many ways to describe or define school choice. The most obvious example of school choice is demonstrated by parents who choose to send their child(ren) to private school. Other examples include

parents paying taxes outside their resident school district to enable their child(ren) to attend schools in another district, or in rare cases parents could move their residence to a more favorable school district. Minnesota currently allows students to attend any school of their choice in the state (Weiss, 1990). For the purposes of this study school choice is defined as the parent's responsibility and right to decide where their child will attend school, regardless of residential school district boundaries.

The questions addressed in this research report are: (1) what is school choice? (2) what are the desired effects from school choice? and (3) what are the attitudes present in South Carolina toward public school choice? The purpose of this study was to examine three aspects of school choice, and assess the attitudes of parents, teachers, university education professors, and school superintendents toward the issue of public school choice.

One of the primary reasons for the school choice movement relates to the lack of demonstrated, measurable progress in public school reform in the 1980s (Marciniak, 1989). Most of the theoritical literature offers the common sense conclusion that parents would be empowered and more likely to assist the school if they had responsibility of deciding their child's educational future. Therefore, school choice is based on two assumptions: (1) that all parents want the responsibility of educating their child, and (2) that schools and educators will increase efforts to achieve high standards.

RESEARCH REVIEW

School choice may be defined as the responsibility and right of parents to decide where their child will attend school, regardless of residential school district boundaries. School choice advocates postulate that there is no one best school for all students. As stated by Seymour Fliegel "...most educators agree that there's no one best way to learn. But most schools still try to teach everyone the same way" (Brandt, 1990, p. 20). Consequently, to guarantee success to all students, schools must be diversified to accommodate all learning styles. Since the United States is a melting pot society, no one school or program can be perfect for all members of a diversified, democratic society. Many parents desire the opportunity to select a learning environment that relates to the family values, beliefs and orientation (Nathan,1986). The people who support school choice believe that parents would become more involved with their child's learning if the child was taught in an environment the parents believed to be beneficial to the child.

Marciniak (1989) states that school choice is considered a reform option because the United States has not demonstrated significant progress in improving education. School choice empowers parents and challenges teachers and principals to improve their schools. School choice assumes that parents want to send their child to a school that best responses to the child's unique talents and interests. The next logical assumption is that as parents select schools, the power

of the market place will force schools to make positive changes, no longer will parents use their voice as a voter or taxpayer to be recognized by schools. Schools that are not able to retain students will have accountability problems attempting to prove their existence worth-while (Hood, 1990).

The cornerstone of the Bush Administration's educational policy is school choice. The Education Department has developed a choice "outreach office." Former Secretary of Education, Lauro F. Cavazos stated that school choice will empower the parents, who, he feels, knows what is best for their children. The new Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander also supports school choice. These educational leaders believe that through choice the family's role and parent's role in the child's education will increase. Michelle Easton, deputy undersecretary will oversee the Education Department's "outreach office." The functions to be carried out are:

* establish choice hotline, to provide free information on school choice (1-800-442-PICK)
* resource bank of experts, to be used as consultants to educators and policy makers
* sponsor symposiums
* consult with urban educators to show how choice can tackle their problems

* sponsor workshops illustrating how choice programs work (Pitsch, 1990)

Advocates of school choice believe implementation of the concept will have three effects: (1) increased parental involvement, (2) school improvement due competition of the market place, and (3) greater opportunities for teachers and administrators. Their beliefs are based on the following constructs:

* People like to choose plans of action concerning their families
* Improved student morale and enhanced teacher professionalism, account for high student achievement
* Racial and economic integration are encouraged
* The concept is endorsed by the National Governors' Association and should enjoy state political support
* President Bush has called it "the single most promising idea in education" (Boschee & Hunt, 1990)
* Students will choose where to attend school and attendance will increase, lowering the drop-out rate
* Students differ greatly and need many learning environment choices
* Effective school climate will develop
* Teachers will have opportunity to match their teaching style with a school philosophy and teaching style

* Attracts groups with same interest, focus, and mission a commitment and loyalty develops in sharing beliefs (Nathan, 1986)

METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument was developed to determine the opinions of parents, teachers, education professors and superintendents in South Carolina concerning school choice. The research method consisted survey instrument development and the selection of subjects, followed by the data collection and analysis to determine attitudes. The results report opinions and attitudes.

The purpose of the study was to determine if school choice is perceived as a positive or negative reform option. A cluster sample of naturally occurring groups was surveyed: all fourth grade parents at Pendleton Elementary School, all teachers at Pendleton Elementary School (Anderson School District Four) all education professors at Clemson University's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and all South Carolina school superintendents. The selection of survey questions was based on a review of the 1990 Kappan Poll Survey.

A single survey instrument developed by the researchers was used to carry out this experiment. The instrument was field tested 50 developmental studies students at Clemson University to increase reliability.

Parent surveys were distributed by all fourth grade teachers to the students, who took the survey home and returned it to school. The Pendleton Elementary

teachers' surveys were placed in each teachers' mail box to be completed and returned to the assistant principal's office. Education professors' surveys were placed in their office mail boxes to be returned to a designated office mail box. These procedures were to provide anonymity to the subjects. The superintendent surveys were mailed with return self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All completed surveys were returned to the researchers for analysis. Surveys were divided into the correct population group - parent, teacher, professor or superintendent and reported individually for each question and each population. The compiled data for each question and each population were converted to percentages which were compared.

RESULTS

Sixty-nine of the one hundred six parent surveys were returned. The responses on the survey were compiled and the results recorded in Table 1. Parents responding to the survey reported a strong support for school choice as 67% of parents favored school choice and 33% were against choice. In addition, 67% of parents responding would be willing to provide transportation to accomplish school choice, while 33% would not provide transportation. The parent respondents also believed that education would improve with school choice (48%), while 52% thought no improvement in education would occur as a result of school choice. The majority 87%, of the parent respondents felt racial and

academic balance should be maintained, 13% opposed the balance. Also, 81% of the parents want tax dollars to follow a student to his school of choice and 19% disagreed. The compiled results were converted to percentages on Table 6.

Twenty-three of the forty-three teacher surveys were returned. The responses on the survey were compiled and the results recorded in Table 2. The teacher respondents reported that 39% favored school choice, while 61% were against choice. In contrast, 65% of the teachers would be willing to supply transportantion to accomplish school choice, while 35% would not be willing to provide transportation. Very few teachers 22%, felt school improvement would occur as a result of school choice, however, most of the teacher respondents 78%, felt no improvement in schools would occur with school choice. Maintaining racial and academic standards was support by 83% of the teacher respondents, while 17% of teacher respondents did not favor maintaining such standards. Teacher respondents also reported that 70% wanted tax dollars to follow students to their school of choice, while 30% felt school tax dollars should not follow the student.

Twelve of the forty education professor surveys were returned. The responses on the survey were compiled and the results recorded in Table 3. The education professors responding to the survey reported 67% in favor of school choice while 33% were opposed. The majority of the education professors responding 67%, were willing to provide transportation for their child to attend

a school of choice, while 33% are not willing to provide transportation. Also, 58% of the responding education professors reported that education would be improved with school choice, while 42% fell no improvement in education would occur from school choice. The responding education professors supported maintaining a balance of racial and academic standards by 83% to 17%. A majority of responding education professors supported tax dollars following the student by 75% to 25%.

Seventy-three of the ninety-one South Carolina school superintendents returned useable surveys. The responses on the survey were compiled and the results recorded in Table 4. Superintendent respondents were overwhelmingly opposed to school choice as only 29% favored and 71% were against school choice. Similarly, superintendent respondents were opposed to providing transportation by a school district for school choice by 27% to 73%. The responding superintendents were also unsure that education would improve as a result of school choice by a 21% to 79% margin. The responding superintendents also believed that the racial and academic balance should be maintained by 81% to 19%. Of the responding superintendents, 52% felt tax dollars should follow a student to a school of choice, while 48% reported that tax dollars should stay at the assigned school.

DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the variety of opinions and attitudes toward school choice which exist with different clientile groups. The response of one superintendent highlights the negative effects of school choice.

> Public school choice will have a detrimental effect. We should be working to insure that ALL public schools are excellent. Unless the state provides transportation for students who choose a school different from the one to which he/she has been assigned, only middle class and wealthy students will be able to make a choice. Once again, the students who usually need the most help will be forced to do without. This proposed system is more malignant than "separate but equal" because the state would actually be endorsing "separate and not equal" schools for out children. The proposed system of choice doesn't even pretend that the schools would be equal. There are so many problems with the system of choice that I hardly know where to begin.
>
> 1. The state is endorsing unequal educational opportunities for children attending public schools.
> 2. How could this possibly benefit children in rural districts?
> 3. Is the state going to provide transportation to implement choice? At what cost? Could not that money be used more effectively to provide a quality education to all our children?

4. Exactly how much choice will be endorsed? What will happen when 700 students choose a school that can accommodate 400? Who decides which students attend the school of their choice? On what objective criteria will these selections be made?
5. What are the motives of the politicians who favor this type of public school system? Could this be yet another attempt to avoid funding education at the level of funding necessary to provide excellence in the educational opportunities of all our children?

Of all the ridiculous ideas I have heard during my years in public education, choice is the most diabolical yet.

Positive effects of school choice were stated by other South Carolina superintendents.

1. School choice enhances the total interest in a child's desires to want to learn.
2. School choice will cause principals and teachers to work harder and better.
3. School choice will cause educators to analyze programs and procedures and to be more proactive.
4. If accountability of teachers and administrators is tied into choice, it could have a dramatic impact!

5. It would put an increased focus on meeting the customers' needs.
6. School choice would increase competition, enrich the instructional programs and enhance teaching methods.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

This study raises several critical implications for South Carolina educational administrators. School administrators need to examine the funding procedures that are tied to school choice. If school property tax dollars stay in the county or district in which they are collected, some districts will have the same funding now available with less students to educate, thereby increasing the amount spent on per-pupil expenditures. But, the district that attracts new students, living in another tax district, will have more students to educate with less funds, creating greater inequity than what is present neow. If tax dollars follow a student to his/her school of choice, poor districts will become poorer, while wealthy districts become richer.

Secondly, staff development should occur to inform school administrators about school choice and the many types of choice programs available. Administrators and teachers need to have a vision of their schools' future. Administrators should examine the school's educational priorities and how choice will impact the school's goals. Choice must be a shared vision, which involves all

concerned with the school, not just a few people.

The third implication from this study is that much more research must be conducted on school choice. Research needs to examine existing school choice programs and determine the outcomes of such programs. Further research needs to be conducted to determine the purposes and reasons for support or lack of support for school choice. A reform movement of this magnititude needs a research base to establish validity and support.

The most obvious implication is the dichotomy of opinion expressed by parents and superintendents. Administrators should be pro-active and address the different perceptions expressed by parents and others. Hiding one's head in the sand and hoping the concept will go away, may not work in this scenario. With choice being advocated by national politicans and public interest groups, administrators must address the issue.

These are but a few of the many questions which must be addressed by educational administrators in the near future if school choice is implemented on a large-scale basis. The answers to these questions will not be easy, but the effects may be terminal for public education. Consider the following questions which educational administrators must face.

1. If parents select schools, will an elitist school system develop?
2. Will schools them become divided alone economic and/or racial lines?

3. Will public relations, ie, selling the school or school district, become more important than test scores?
4. Will schools be judged on looks or performance?
5. Will athletics and extra-curricular activities become more important than academic performance?
6. Will some schools become overcrowded while other buildings sit empty?
7. How will schools project student populations to determine facility and staffing needs?
8. How will the schools be funded? If in fact tax dollars follow a student to the school of choice, will poor districts become poorer while wealthy districts become richer?
9. How will transportant be accomplished?
10. How will policy decisions be made concerning schools that will be closed?

This study does little to address the questions outlined above. However, it does illustrate the desperate need for rapid, yet thoughtful, research and deliberation. The administrators in this study reported that American public education would be unalterably changed by school choice. The question which remains is, should American public education be changed? This is the only country in the world which attempts to education all of its citizens, and yet our

students do not score among the best in the world on some standardized tests. Does this mean that the system needs overhaul or replacement? Some educational leaders, particularly Secretary of Education Alexander postulated a position which would replace the American educational system with a new system of school choice. Our limited research indicates that educational leaders in the field do not support such a plan.

CONCLUSIONS

The only results obtained from this study which could be generalized to another population were from the superintendents. The other populations were to small to yield suitable results. Consequelty, the only conclusions which can be drawn relate to the perceptions of the responding superintendents. From the comments provided by the superintendents, the most obvious conclusion is that superintendents do not favor choice. Although this research does not address why such opposition exists, without support from the educational leader of the school district, there will be limited opportunity for choice in South Carolina public schools.

TABLE 1

Parent Survey Tallied Results

QUESTION		YES	NO
1.	Favoring school choice	46 (67%)	23 (33%)
2.	Providing transportation	46 (67%)	23 (33%)
3.	Choice will improve education	33 (48%)	36 (52%)
4.	Racial and academic balance maintained	60 (87%)	9 (13%)
5.	Tax dollars follow student	56 (81%)	13 (19%)

TABLE 2

Teacher Survey Tallied Results

QUESTION		YES	NO
1.	Favoring school choice	9 (39%)	14 (61%)
2.	Providing transportation	15 (65%)	8 (35%)
3.	Choice will improve education	5 (22%)	18 (78%)
4.	Racial and academic balance maintained	19 (83%)	4 (17%)
5.	Tax dollars follow student	16 (70%)	7(30%)

TABLE 3

Professor Survey Tallied Results

QUESTION		YES	NO
1.	Favoring school choice	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
2.	Providing transportation	8 (67%)	4 (33%)
3.	Choice will improve education	7 (58%)	5 (42%)
4.	Racial and academic balance maintained	10 (83%)	2 (17%)
5.	Tax dollars follow student	9 (75%)	3 (25%)

TABLE 4

Superintendent Survey Tallied Results

QUESTION		YES	NO
1.	Favoring school choice	21 (29%)	52 (71%)
2.	Providing transportation	20 (27%)	53 (73%)
3.	Choice will improve education	15 (21%)	58 (79%)
4.	Racial and academic balance maintained	59 (81%)	14 (19%)
5.	Tax dollars follow student	38 (52%)	35 (48%)

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